

OFFICE OF LEGISLATIVE RESEARCH
PUBLIC ACT SUMMARY



PA 11-85—sSB 929
Education Committee
Appropriations Committee

AN ACT CONCERNING CLOSING THE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT GAP

SUMMARY: This act requires or authorizes a number of steps intended to help the state and local school districts address the academic achievement gap between racial and ethnic student groups.

It:

1. creates an achievement gap task force and specifies its membership, duties (including creation of a master plan to close the achievement gap), and reporting requirements;
2. creates an interagency council for ending the achievement gap and states its membership and responsibilities;
3. permits school boards with low-achieving schools to increase the number of school sessions each year and the number of school hours each day;
4. changes laws regarding kindergarten reading assessments, school district student objectives, and elementary teacher certification;
5. authorizes the education commissioner to conduct a best practices literacy pilot study;
6. requires the State Department of Education (SDE) to approve and distribute model curricula and frameworks in reading and mathematics for grades prekindergarten to four; and
7. requires the SDE's School Reform Resource Center to provide professional development for teachers and develop strategies for students in danger of failing and culturally relevant teaching methods for students' whose primary language is not English.

EFFECTIVE DATE: July 1, 2011, except for the provision creating the achievement gap task force, which is effective upon passage.

§ 1 — ACHIEVEMENT GAP TASK FORCE

The act establishes an 11-member task force to address academic achievement gaps between Connecticut students and consider effective approaches to closing those gaps in elementary, middle, and high schools.

By July 1, 2012, the task force must develop a master plan to eliminate the academic achievement gaps in consultation with the SDE, the Connecticut State University System, the Interagency Council for Ending the Achievement Gap that the act establishes, and the Education Committee. The task force terminates on January 1, 2020. It also must submit annual progress reports starting January 1, 2013.

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In addition to the education commissioner, or the commissioner's designee, the task force consists of members appointed by the following:

1. the House speaker and the Senate president pro tempore, two each;
2. the House and Senate majority leaders, one each;
3. the House and Senate minority leaders, one each;
4. the General Assembly Black and Puerto Rican Caucus chairperson, one; and
5. the governor, one.

Any task force member, except the education commissioner and the member the governor appoints, may be a state legislator.

All task force appointments must be made no later than August 6, 2011. Vacancies must be filled by the appointing authority.

The House speaker and the Senate president pro tempore must select the chairpersons from among the 11 task force members. The chairpersons must schedule the first meeting of the task force, which must be held by September 5, 2011. The Education Committee's administrative staff must serve as the task force's administrative staff.

§ 1 — MASTER PLAN TO CLOSE THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

The act requires the master plan to:

1. identify the achievement gaps that exist among and between (a) racial groups, (b) ethnic groups, (c) socioeconomic groups, (d) genders, and (e) English language learners and students whose primary language is English;
2. focus efforts on closing identified achievement gaps;
3. establish annual benchmarks for implementing the master plan and closing the achievement gaps;
4. make recommendations regarding the creation of a secretary of education; and
5. develop a plan for (a) changing the kindergarten entrance age requirement from age five by January 1 to age five by October 1 of the school year and (b) creating spaces in school readiness programs for those children who reach age five after October 1 and are not eligible to enroll in kindergarten for that year.

The task force may amend the master plan at any time.

Definition of Achievement Gaps

For purposes of the task force's master plan and other parts of the act, "achievement gaps" mean the existence of a significant disparity in the academic performance of students among and between (1) racial groups, (2) ethnic groups, (3) socioeconomic groups, (4) genders, and (5) English language learners and students whose primary language is English.

Deadline and Progress Reports

The task force must submit the master plan to the Education Committee, the

Interagency Council for Ending the Achievement Gap, and the House and Senate clerks by July 1, 2012. Beginning no later than January 1, 2013 and annually until January 1, 2020, the task force must submit progress reports on the master plan's implementation and related recommendations to the Education Committee and the House and Senate clerks.

§ 2 — INTERAGENCY COUNCIL FOR ENDING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

The act establishes a nine-member Interagency Council for Ending the Achievement Gap that must:

1. assist the act's achievement gap task force in developing the achievement gap master plan described above;
2. implement the plan's provisions and, if necessary, recommend legislation related to the plan to the Education Committee; and
3. submit annual progress reports to the Education Committee and the achievement gap task force on implementing the plan.

The council consists of the following officials or their designees: (1) lieutenant governor; (2) the education, children and families, social services, public health, higher education, economic and community development, and administrative services commissioners; and (3) Office of Policy and Management secretary. The lieutenant governor, or her designee, must serve as the council chairperson.

The council is within the SDE for administrative purposes only and must meet at least quarterly.

§ 3 — EXTENDED SCHOOL DAYS AND INCREASED SCHOOL SESSIONS

State law requires school districts to provide at least 180 days of sessions in a school year. The act specifically permits local or regional boards of education for schools designated as low-achieving under state law to increase the number of school sessions each year and the number of school hours each day in order to improve student performance and remove the school from the list of low-achieving schools.

§ 4 — KINDERGARTEN STUDENTS AND THE SUMMER READING PROGRAM

The act makes several changes to the law requiring all priority school districts to provide a summer reading program for kindergarten students, reading assessments of young students, and individual reading plans to improve literacy.

Prior law required priority school districts to evaluate the reading level of students in grades one through three in the middle and at the end of the school year. Starting with the 2011-12 school year, the act requires the reading level of all (1) students in grades one through three to be assessed at the beginning, middle, and end of the year and (2) kindergarten students to be assessed at the end of the year. It changes the criterion for kindergarten students to go into the summer reading program from the teacher's determination that they need

additional help, to the school's determination that they are substantially deficient in reading based on measures established by the State Board of Education.

It also allows a priority school district to require kindergarten students who are substantially deficient in reading to attend summer school. Prior law only allowed a district to require students in grades one to three who are reading deficient to go to summer school.

When a student is determined to be reading deficient, the school must develop a personal reading plan for that student. The act changes this to an individual reading plan and requires the plan to include assessment results and applicable federal requirements. The act permits these assessments to be at the beginning, middle, or end of the year, rather than just at the middle or end of the year as under prior law.

By law, the plan must include additional instruction, within available funds, such as tutoring or an after-school, school vacation, weekend, or summer school intensive intervention reading program as described in law.

The act adds the requirement that school literacy teams monitor each student's individual reading plan. It requires the literacy team to include, at a minimum, teachers, school reading specialists, internal or external reading consultants, the school principal, and the provider of the additional instruction. Under prior law, the school had to discuss the plan with the provider of the additional instruction.

By law, decisions to promote students to the next grade who have individual reading plans because they were found to be deficient in reading must be based on documented progress. Under prior law, this standard applied only to students in grades one through three. The act extends it to kindergarten and expands the applicability to all educational and instructional decisions, not just the decision to promote to the next grade. It makes the conforming change that the school principal must justify in writing to the superintendent any decision to promote a kindergarten student who is deficient in reading.

By law, each superintendent must report to the education commissioner on the number of students who are reading deficient and are promoted to the next grade for grades one through three. The act requires the superintendent to also report on kindergarten students in this group.

It also makes conforming and technical changes.

§ 5 — LITERACY BEST PRACTICES PILOT STUDY

The act authorizes the education commissioner to (1) conduct a pilot study to promote best practices in early literacy and closing academic achievement gaps and (2) identify schools to participate in the study.

The pilot study may use various assessment tools, including those used in the summer reading program, and may assess students more frequently than otherwise required (the act increases the minimum number of assessments to three). The act also permits the education commissioner to waive the summer reading program assessments for certain grade levels in participating schools. It specifies that schools participating in the pilot must comply with federal assessment requirements. The commissioner may accept funds from private or public sources for this pilot. SDE can research and evaluate participating schools

and this may be done with the help of external groups or organizations.

For purposes of this pilot study, “achievement gaps” means the existence of a significant disparity in the academic performance of students among and between (1) racial groups, (2) ethnic groups, (3) socioeconomic groups, (4) genders, and (5) English language learners and students whose primary language is English.

SDE must report the pilot study’s findings to the Education Committee by October 1, 2013.

§ 6 — SCHOOL DISTRICT STUDENT OBJECTIVES

By law, all school districts must craft educational goals that are consistent with the state’s educational goals and student objectives that relate to the goals. The act requires local and regional boards of education to annually establish the student objectives for each school year.

§ 7 — MATH ASSESSMENT FOR ELEMENTARY EDUCATION CERTIFICATION

The act requires that, effective July 1, 2011, anyone seeking certification as an elementary education teacher must achieve a satisfactory evaluation on the appropriate SDE-approved math assessment.

§ 8 – MODEL CURRICULA FOR READING AND MATH

The act requires SDE, by July 1, 2012, to approve and make available model curricula and frameworks in reading and mathematics for grades prekindergarten to four for use by local and regional school districts or individual schools that SDE identifies as having academic achievement gaps. The curricula and frameworks must be culturally relevant, research-based, and aligned with student achievement standards adopted by the SDE.

§ 9 – SCHOOL REFORM RESOURCE CENTER’S ADDITIONAL DUTIES

By law, SDE’s Connecticut School Reform Resource Center, located within the State Education Resource Center, must provide a program of professional development activities for administrators and school board members. The act expands this to teachers and requires it to include research-based child development and reading instruction tools and practices.

The act requires the center to develop (1) strategies for assisting students who are in danger of failing and (2) culturally relevant methods for educating students whose primary language is not English.

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